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Forest Service NEWS



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FEATURE

FIREWOOD - HOW MUCH FOR HOW LONG?

by Norman Hesseldahl

If your exposure to the lifestyle of central Oregon is limited to a week in hunting camp, or a holiday week-end at a ski resort, your concept of "firewood" is likely to be one of a friendly open flame, popping and smoking in a soot-rhined fireplace.

But if you live in central Oregon, and heat your home - as do so many residents - with a wood-fueled stove, then "firewood" means more, much more. To begin with, it is an element of survival. It's also an economic factor - a defense against mushrooming energy bills. In fact, to many central Oregon residents, firewood is considered a basic component of the lifestyle - something akin to rain in the Willamette Valley. Mention "firewood" to these full-time users and the mental images conjured up are likely to be ones of chainsaws, splitting mauls, pickups rattling over dusty roads, and, oh yes, the haunting spectre of scarcity.

Scarcity is not a pleasant topic when discussed among the firewood fraternity. Scarcity ranks right up there with flat tires, broken axles, and chainsaws that refuse to start. Scarcity is also hard to understand. Especially when one looks at the vast acreages of potential firewood available on the Deschutes National Forest - the Firewood Mecca of central Oregon.

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"There are places on the Deschutes National Forest where -- thanks to the Mountain Pine Beetle -- you can look out over a patch of standing dead lodgepole capable of providing someone a dozen lifetime supplies of firewood," said Dave Mohla, Supervisor of the Deschutes N.F. "Problem is, there's more than one market for that wood, and the demand is increasing."

On one side of the supply-demand equation is people, Mohla explains. More people converting to wood as a primary or supplemental source of home and business heat. More people moving into the beautiful central Oregon country, each wanting their own annual supply of five or ten or fifteen cords of fuelwood. More people finding new technological uses for wood fiber, in such markets as wood chips, particle board, house logs, specialty wood products and hog fuel. What it all amounts to, Mohla says, is an ever-increasing demand.

The supply side of the equation, says Mohla, is currently glutted. Historically, there has been a limited demand in central Oregon for tree species other than the ponderosa pine and similar large-growing species which can be readily converted into lumber. Vast stands of lodgepole pine have been left pretty much to their own devices in the past. Today, these stands are overmature and dying, either from the pine beetle or from simple old age. This creates idyllic conditions for area firewood gatherers; standing dead lodgepole pine makes superb firewood.

But what happens beyond the mid-point in that equation, the theoretical "equal sign" where supply and demand strike a balance?

"We are much closer to the balance-point than you might believe," cautioned Mohla. "The demand curve continues to grow, while the supply side is trending down. Accessible sources of firewood as we know it today will be gone within fifteen years. When we hit that point, something will have to give."

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Exactly who or what that ill-defined "something" will be is of great concern to industrial users and firewood cutters alike.

"How much wood, if any, should we reserve for firewood cutters each year," mused Mohla. "I'm not sure I know. But I know how I intend to find out."

The answer to the firewood supply question will come, Mohla says, through the long-awaited Land Management Plan for the Deschutes National Forest.

"One of the issues the Plan sets out to resolve is that of firewood supply," he explained. Through a series of alternatives, a draft of the plan examines different methods of meeting - or not meeting - firewood demand on the forest, and the impacts of each alternative. "One alternative we examine is to make no special provisions for firewood supplies; when it's gone, it's gone. Another alternative is to reserve up to 75 thousand cords exclusively for personal-use firewood cutters each year. What our final decision will be depends, in a large part, on what we hear from the public in response to the alternatives contained in our draft plan."

The draft plan, and its attendant draft environmental impact statement, are currently "on the street" for public review. They are imposing documents, containing hundreds of pages of statistics, narratives and chart-laden appendixes. Fortunately, the lay-public (which includes me, and you, and everybody else who doesn't want to spend several weeks reviewing these tomes) has a reasonable option to select.

"We've developed a Reviewer's Guide to the draft plan," Mohla said. "It is short, understandable, and provides enough information for people to make an informed response to the alternatives contained in the draft plan."

The Reviewer's Guide is available from the Forest Planner, Deschutes National Forest, 1645 NE Forbes Rd., Bend, OR 97701, or by telephoning (503) 388-8561.

There are plenty of good excuses for not sending for a Reviewer's Guide and commenting on the draft plan for the Deschutes National Forest. But for me, there are at least two good reasons for making the effort: reason one is the firewood I'm going to need next winter; reason two is the firewood I'm going to need the winter after that. Then there is reason three, and reason six, and reason ten...

